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The USSR

**REGIONAL AND
POLITICAL ANALYSIS**

Secret

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RP ASU 77-002
10 February 1977

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Approved For Release 2004/07/16 : CIA-RDP79T00912A000100010002-6

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Soviet Push for Renewed Middle East Peace Conference

The Soviets continue to push for the early resumption of the Middle East peace conference in Geneva, which they maintain is the only avenue to successful negotiations. This position reflects both their concern that they will again be excluded from the negotiating process and their eagerness to play a leading role in that process--a role guaranteed by their position at the conference as co-chairman with the US.

Soviet concern about their participation in peace talks was reinforced when the Egyptians began their so-called peace offensive without consulting the USSR and when Egypt and Syria reached a rapprochement without Soviet participation. The Soviets view both developments as part of a possible US-Saudi plot to conduct negotiations outside the Geneva framework and to exclude the USSR.

While anxious to prevent such a development, the Soviets have been limited in their ability to respond. They cannot openly voice disapproval of a broadly stated Arab peace offensive without appearing obstructionist, nor can they attack a rapprochement between Egypt and Syria when they ostensibly support Arab unity in the struggle against Israel. They have therefore voiced their support for the Geneva forum more vigorously in order to demonstrate their own leadership role and to warn of the consequences of proceeding without them.

The Soviets have used several methods to indicate that they must be included in the negotiating process. They have frequently noted both publicly and privately that step-by-step diplomacy is no longer possible and that comprehensive talks at Geneva represent the only approach with a chance of success. More concretely they notified the United Nations last December that they would not pay their 1975-76 assessment for support

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of the United Nations emergency forces, specifically those forces designated to police Phase II of the Sinai disengagement accords. They asserted that the disengagement talks had been conducted outside the Geneva framework, that they had not been involved, and that they therefore did not bear any responsibility to support the accords. Clearly, the message being delivered was that the USSR does not intend to recognize or support similar subsequent agreements either. Finally, Soviet efforts to improve their relations in the Arab world with such radical, anti-settlement forces as Libya and Iraq, are a reminder that the USSR is in a position to assist those who would disrupt unsatisfactory negotiations.

To balance their warnings, the Soviets have simultaneously conducted a seemingly positive diplomatic campaign designed to demonstrate that they should play a leadership role in peace talks. Recently, Soviet leader Brezhnev voiced positions which, while not new, suggest a more accommodating position. Brezhnev stated in a speech on January 18 that "Israel of course has the right to state independence and secure existence, but the Arab people of Palestine have a similar right." While the formal Soviet position has always included recognition of Israel's right to exist, Soviet leaders have generally played down this recognition, highlighting instead their backing for the Palestinian cause. Their desire to move toward Geneva requires some gesture toward Israel, however. Brezhnev's statement has since been treated by the Soviet press as a constructive approach to the Middle East problem. A Soviet academician stated that Brezhnev's speech represented a "concession, a gesture of good will to Israel and the United States."

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In a similar gesture [redacted]

Brezhnev agreed that there were extremists within the Palestine Liberation Organization who would not recognize Israel, but that "we will show them that this step is necessary." This statement again conveyed the impression that the Soviet Union is prepared to play an active and constructive role in pushing for a settlement.

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Brezhnev's statements are reminiscent of the Soviet proposal last October calling for a return to Geneva and adding a fourth condition for a Middle East settlement to the standard Soviet three (withdrawal of Israeli forces to the 1967 borders, recognition of a Palestinian state, guaranteed security and borders for all nations in the area). To these were added a call for an end to the state of war in the Middle East. This was undoubtedly designed to convey good will on the part of the USSR, as well as to put pressure on Israel, which has long called for a formal end to the state of war as part of any settlement.

On the surface, these episodes suggest an aggressive Soviet diplomacy aimed at leading the Middle East toward an equitable settlement. In fact, they reflect the continuing Soviet effort to walk a careful line between trying to appear a leader and being careful not to get out in front of the "confrontation states" (particularly Egypt and Syria) with respect to either the framework or substance of the talks. Although they have hinted they will be flexible, the Soviets have in fact avoided taking any positions which might be criticized by these countries. Although they sometimes have been vague in their statements about the crucial question of Palestinian participation at Geneva, they have both reaffirmed their view that the Palestinians must be represented from the beginning of the conference and steadily maintained that this is ultimately a matter for the Arabs to decide. In short, it seems likely that they will continue to follow the position of the "confrontation states" on all important substantive matters and, at the same time, try to project the appearance of innovation and leadership and ensure that Geneva remains the forum for negotiations.

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